

The After-Action Review

DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF AFTER-ACTION REVIEWS

An after-action review (AAR) is a professional discussion of an event, focused on performance standards, that enables soldiers to discover for themselves what happened, why it happened, and how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses. It is a tool leaders and units can use to get maximum benefit from every mission or task. It provides-

- Candid insights into specific soldier, leader, and unit strengths and weaknesses from various perspectives.
- Feedback and insight critical to battle-focused training.
- Details often lacking in evaluation reports alone.

Evaluation is the basis for the commander's unit-training assessment. No commander, no matter how skilled, will see as much as the individual soldiers and leaders who actually conduct the training. Leaders can better correct deficiencies and sustain strengths by carefully evaluating and comparing soldier, leader, and unit performance against the standard. The AAR is the keystone of the evaluation process.

Feedback compares the actual output of a process with the intended outcome. By focusing on the task's standards and by describing specific observations, leaders and soldiers identify strengths and weaknesses and together decide how to improve their performances. This shared learning improves task proficiency and promotes unit bonding and esprit. Squad and platoon leaders will use the information to develop input for unit-training plans. The AAR is a valid and valuable technique regardless of branch, echelon, or training task.

Of course, AARs are not cure-alls for unit-training problems. Leaders must still make on-the-spot corrections and take responsibility for training their soldiers and units. However, AARs are a key part of the training process. The goal is to improve soldier, leader, and unit performance. The result is a more cohesive and proficient fighting force.

Because soldiers and leaders participating in an AAR actively discover what happened and why, they learn and remember more than they would from a critique alone. A critique only gives one viewpoint and frequently provides little opportunity for discussion of events by participants. Soldier observations and comments may not be encouraged. The climate of the critique, focusing only on what is wrong, prevents candid discussion of training events and stifles learning and team building.

TYPES OF AFTER-ACTION REVIEWS

All AARs follow the same general format, involve the exchange of ideas and observations, and focus on improving training proficiency. How leaders conduct a

particular AAR determines whether it is formal or informal. A formal AAR is resource-intensive and involves the planning, coordination, and preparation of supporting training aids, the AAR site, and support personnel. Informal AARs (usually for soldier, crew, squad, and platoon training) require less preparation and planning.

Formal

Leaders plan formal AARs at the same time they finalize the near-term training plan (six to eight weeks before execution). Formal AARs require more planning and preparation than informal AARs. They may require site reconnaissance and selection, coordination for training aids (terrain models, map blow-ups, and so on), and selection and training of observers and controllers (OCs).

NOTE: Figure 1-1 lists the key points in all AARs. Figure 1-2 shows the AAR format. Figure 1-3 lists characteristics of formal and informal AARs.

After-action reviews--

- Are conducted during or immediately after each event.
- Focus on intended training objectives.
- Focus on soldier, leader, and unit performance.
- Involve all participants in the discussion.
- Use open-ended questions.
- Are related to specific standards.
- Determine strengths and weaknesses.
- Link performance to subsequent training.

Figure 1-1. AAR Key Points

- Introduction and rules.
- Review of training objectives.
- Commander's mission and intent (what was supposed to happen).
- Opposing force (OPFOR) commander's mission and intent (when appropriate).
- Relevant doctrine and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs).
- Summary of recent events (what happened).
- Discussion of key issues (why it happened and how to improve).
- Discussion of optional issues.
- Discussion of force protection issues (discussed throughout).
- Closing comments (summary).

Figure 1-2. AAR Format

Formal reviews--

Informal reviews--

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have external observers and controllers (OCs) • Take more time. • Use complex training aids. • Are scheduled beforehand. • Are conducted where best supported. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted by internal chain of command. • Take less time. • Use simple training aids. • Are conducted when needed. • Are held at the training site.
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Figure 1-3. Types of AARs

Formal AARs are usually held at company level and above. An exception might be an AAR of crew, section, or small-unit performance after gunnery tables or after a platoon situational training exercise (STX). Squad and platoon AARs are held before the execution of formal company and higher echelon AARs. This allows all levels of the unit to benefit from an AAR experience. It also provides OCs and leaders with observations and trends to address during the formal AAR.

During formal AARs, the AAR leader (unit leader or OC) focuses the discussion of events on training objectives. At the end, the leader reviews key points and issues identified (reinforcing learning that took place during the discussion) and once again focuses on training objectives.

Informal

Leaders usually conduct informal AARs for soldier and small-unit training at platoon level and below. At company and battalion levels, leaders may conduct informal AARs when resources for formal AARs, including time, are unavailable. Informal AARs use the standard AAR format.

Leaders may use informal AARs as on-the-spot coaching tools while reviewing soldier and unit performances during training. For example, after destroying an enemy observation post (OP) during a movement to contact, a squad leader could conduct an informal AAR to make corrections and reinforce strengths. Using nothing more than pinecones to represent squad members, he and his soldiers could discuss the contact from start to finish. The squad could quickly--

- Evaluate their performance against the Army standard (or unit standard if there is no published Army standard).
- Identify their strengths and weaknesses.
- Decide how to improve their performance when training continues.

Informal AARs provide immediate feedback to soldiers, leaders, and units during training. Ideas and solutions the leader gathers during informal AARs can be immediately put to use as the unit continues its training. Also, during lower echelon informal AARs,

leaders often collect teaching points and trends they can use as discussion points during higher echelon formal AARs.

Informal AARs maximize training value because all unit members are actively involved. They learn what to do, how to do it better, and the importance of the roles they play in unit-task accomplishment. They then know how to execute the task to standard.

The most significant difference between formal AARs and informal AARs is that informal AARs require fewer training resources and few, if any, training aids. Although informal AARs may be part of the unit evaluation plan, they are more commonly conducted when the leader or OC feels the unit would benefit. Providing immediate feedback while the training is still fresh in soldiers' minds is a significant strength of informal AARs.

AFTER-ACTION REVIEW PLANNING AND EXECUTION SEQUENCE

To maximize the effectiveness of AARs, leaders should plan and rehearse before training begins. After-action review planning is a routine part of unit near-term planning (six to eight weeks out). During planning, leaders assign OC responsibilities and identify tentative times and locations for AARs. This ensures the allocation of time and resources to conduct AARs and reinforces the important role AARs play in realizing the full benefit of training.

The amount and level of detail leaders need during the planning and preparation process depends on the type of AAR they will conduct and on available resources. The AAR process has four steps:

- Step 1. Planning
- Step 2. Preparing
- Step 3. Conducting
- Step 4. Following up (using AAR results)

NOTE: Chapters 2 through 5 detail each of the four steps. Figure 1-4 is a list of actions leaders should follow to ensure effective AARs.

Planning

- Select and train qualified OCs.
- Review the training and evaluation plan, Army Training and Evaluation Program (ARTEP) mission training plans (MTPs), and soldier training publications (STPs).
- Identify when AARs will occur.
- Determine who will attend AARs.
- Select potential AAR sites.
- Choose training aids.

- Review the AAR plan.

Preparation

- Review training objectives, orders, METL, and doctrine.
- Identify key events OCs are to observe.
- Observe the training and take notes.
- Collect observations from other OCs.
- Organize observations. (Identify key discussion or teaching points.)
- Reconnoiter the selected AAR site.
- Prepare the AAR site.
- Conduct rehearsal.

Conduct

- Seek maximum participation.
- Maintain focus on training objectives.
- Constantly review teaching points.
- Record key points.

Follow up

- Identify tasks requiring retraining.
- Fix the problem -- retrain immediately, revise standing operating procedures (SOPs), integrate into tutors training plans.
- Use to assist in making commander's assessment.